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U.S. Malaria Rise Traced to Vietnam

By Claude Koprowski

Washington Post Staff Writer

A disturbing byproduct of the Vietnam war—an increasing number of servicemen returning home with rare and occasionally fatal diseases—was reported to a scientific assembly at the George Washington University Hospital here.

Additionally, it was reported that efforts to study and eradicate the diseases are frustrated by the Vietcong.

The report was made by Dr. Jack W. Millar, former director of preventive medicine for the Navy and now a professor at the GWU school of medicine.

Millar said the most widespread of the diseases is malaria, which last year infected 6000 to 8000 U.S. troops in Southeast Asia. There were 300,000 man-hours lost to this disease alone, Dr. Millar reported, and 80 per cent of the patients suffered from a particularly deadly strain of the parasite known as plasmodium falciparum.

Many troops infected by malaria return to the United States before the disease breaks out, Dr. Millar said. "A boy leaves Vietnam and in 20 hours he can walk into this hospital. Anybody returning from Southeast Asia with a medical complaint should be studied for possible infection by plasmodium falciparum."

Untreated, it is fatal, he said.

Last year, he said, there were 678 cases of imported malaria in the United States. All but 10 of these were among military personnel returning from Southeast Asia.

From this January to February alone, the incidence of the disease has soared to 722 cases. Most of them are a milder form of malaria than falciparum and readily respond to treatment, Dr. Millar added.

Much malaria could be prevented, he said, if troops would take the medicines they are given. "But you know kids," he said, "they probably throw them away."

Attempts to eradicate the disease in Vietnam have been frustrated by the Vietcong. Although the military have tried spraying Vietcong held areas in attempts to wipe out the malaria-bearing mosquitos.

"We had to pull back our operation when the Vietcong started shooting at us," Dr. Millar said. "There were instances when they did recognize the spraying aircraft and did not shoot."

Dr. Millar, who is chairman of GWU's Department of Epidemiology and Environmental Health, warned his colleagues that malaria, which is borne by mosquitos was not the only disease soldiers were bringing back from Southeast Asia.

In 1966 the World Health Organization reported the highest incidence of bubonic plague in the world was in Vietnam. Because our plague vaccine was 60 per cent effective and our troops lived in sanitary conditions, only six cases of plague were reported last year, Dr. Millar said. But he warned that the disease, which is transmitted by fleas, could also be imported.